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Proposed gypsum quarries raise ire

Environmentalists say companies could mine the mineral in other places.

By Karl Cates

Deseret News staff writer

Gypsum miners say they have a right to expand operations in southern Utah's San Rafael Swell, while environmentalists insist plans by U.S. Gypsum Co. and Western Clay Co. are the perfect argument for repeal of 19th-century mining laws.

The companies have filed separate applications with the Bureau of Land Management for quarry permits just south of I-70 in Emery County.

Both projects are controversial because of their location in a so-called "HR1500" area that the Utah Wilderness Coalition wants set aside as congressionally protected federal wilderness.

The BLM, which is accepting public comment on the proposals until April 25, has argued that much of the region, including the proposed quarry expansions, doesn't qualify for wilderness status.

The dispute has rankled company officials, who say environmentalists have little reason to complain.

"We have some valid mining

claims on lands that are classified for mining out there," said Neal Mortensen, a co-owner of the Aurora-based Western Clay. "By mining them we're merely pursuing out rights that the federal government has given us as U.S. citizens."

"The BLM has recommended no acreage in the area be designated as wilderness," added Matt Gonring, a spokesman for the Chicago-based U.S. Gypsum.

"There's not a whole heck of a lot we can do about it," conceded Mike Matz, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, though he said Western Clay and U.S. Gypsum could just as well mine gypsum deposits elsewhere.

"It's not like this is a difficult-to-find commodity," he said, noting the the San Rafael region is rich in such deposits.

Matz added that the controversy offers critics of the 1872 Mining Act more ammunition against the statute, which for years has weathered attacks from environmentalists who say it amounts to legalization of mineral giveaways.

The law grants mineral rights on public lands for almost nothing and allows claims to be renewed for \$100 a year. For years it has been the target of reform efforts, which have routinely faltered in the face of strong lobbying by

Western mining interests.

No serious movement currently exists in Congress for its repeal, and environmentalists are unlikely to find much help through wilderness action, either.

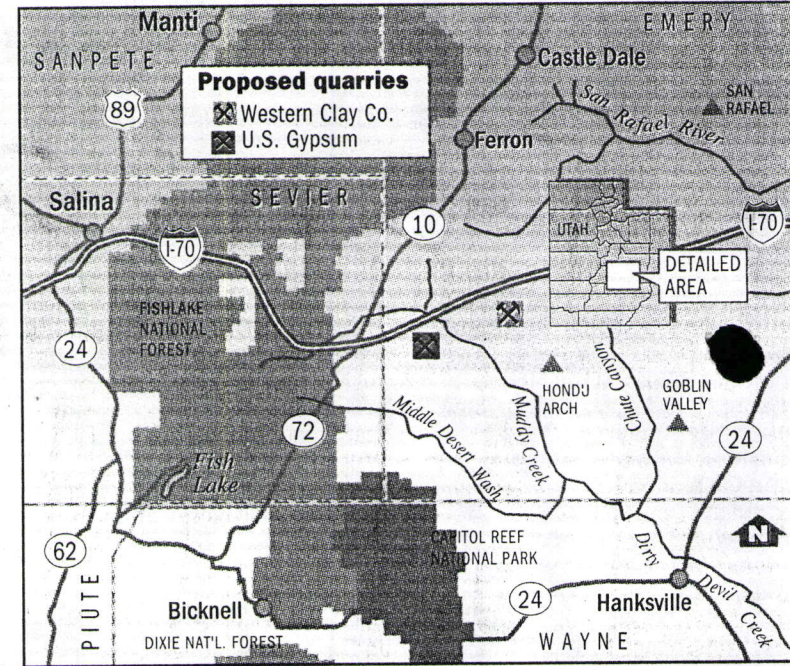
Democratic sponsors of proposals to put about 5.7 million acres, or a 10th of the state — under wilderness protection have stalled in Congress in the face of a stalemate between Utah's Republican delegation and environmental groups.

Western Clay's request is for permission to expand its current five-acre site to include surface disturbance of about 80 more acres in a remote area just west of the Muddy River and about eight miles south of I-70.

Mortensen said the locally owned company employs 22 to 31 people and produces gypsum at its Sevier County plant for high-quality plaster-makers and for soil additives used by farmers in the San Joaquin Valley of California.

U.S. Gypsum, the world's biggest supplier of the mineral, specializes in producing its trademark Sheetrock, which controls about one-third of the domestic drywall market.

Its factory at Sigurd, about 60 miles to the west of its proposed new quarry, dates from 1948 and is the economic mainstay of the town, employing about 100 people.



Though the company's quarries near Sigurd should last another 16 years, Gonrig said, U.S. Gypsum needs additional reserves for long-term plans that include expansion of its plant.

The company's permit request is for a new quarry on 16 to 38 acres about four miles south of I-70 near Devil's Canyon.

SUWA members say it will taint a desert landscape seen daily by thousands of passing motorists, but Gonrig said U.S. Gypsum will build a berm that will hide the quarry

from the interstate.

"You're not going to see it unless you go over it in a helicopter or an airplane," he said.

He also dismissed SUWA concerns that the operations will stir up unsightly dust, explaining that the company has ways to mitigate such pollution.

Gonrig and Mortensen also promised that their respective companies would abide by the letter of BLM law, protecting native plants and animals and restoring the sites once operations are complete.